

We Live, We Love  
1 John 4:7-21  
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Kory Wilcoxson

Happy Mother's Day to all the moms out there. I hope you have already started enjoy the benefits of your special day today. I hope you're NOT like Calvin's mom from the comic strip, "Calvin and Hobbes." On Mother's Day morning, Calvin rushes into her bedroom and says, "Hey Mom, wake up! I made you a Mother's Day Card! I did it all by myself. Read it!"

So Calvin's mom sits up in bed and, with a smile on her face, begins to read the card her sweet little boy made with his own hands: "I was going to buy you a card with hearts of pink and red, but then I thought I'd rather spend the money on me instead. It's awfully hard to buy things when one's allowance is so small," – at which point Calvin gives a little "Ahem" – "so I guess you're pretty lucky I got you anything at all. Happy Mother's Day to you. There I said it. Now I'm done. So how 'bout getting out of bed and cooking breakfast for your son?" At which point his mom looks at Calvin and says, "I'm deeply moved."

You've heard the phrase, "A child only a mother could love?" There you go. That describes Calvin perfectly. And I bet even his mother is challenged at times to sustain that love; but she does, because that's what moms do. The love a mother has for her child is not the kind of love that comes easily. It comes through much pain and struggle and labor – literally – and in some ways only gets harder from there. It is a love forged from the suffering and joy of being a parent.

God's love for us is very similar, I suspect. I have long believed that the closest model we have to understanding God's love for us is a mother's love for her child, because both are loves that come with great costs and great rewards. John tells us in this letter that "God is love," but that really doesn't begin to explain it. This statement is not a feel-good mantra or an empty platitude. This is not bumper sticker fodder or some cutesy slogan. It is not some theological Band-Aid that can explain a betrayal or a bombing, an earthquake or ethic cleansing or a car accident. "God is love" is not an answer to all the "Why?" questions we have; it's simply the ultimate truth.

To fully understand it, we need to understand why John said it. John, one of the disciples, wrote his gospel around 90 AD to a specific congregation. John had given birth to this church, but it was struggling to weather external attacks from the synagogue and internal undermining from false teachers. John had written his gospel to help this community understand the person and work of Jesus, but people within the church were misinterpreting John's words, and using that skewed perspective to create a large division within the church.

Sensing this division was going to destroy his church, John wrote three letters of explanation and clarification, which are the three letters of John at the end of the New Testament. I John is the longest of the three, because John is directly addressing the false teachings that were being spread.

One of the things John is addressing is the hateful discourse coming from the mouths of the false teachers, which leads to our passage today. John is basically saying to his faithful community that they should test the authenticity of this divisive group by

using the measure of love. Is what they say loving? Are they demonstrating love in their actions? If not, then they are not of God, because God is love.

The Greek word for love here is *agape*. The Greeks actually had several words they used to describe love, which makes sense when you think of all the different kinds of love that exists. There was *eros*, which was the romantic, sexual kind of love, demonstrated by Joey Triviani on the show “Friends,” when he would greet an attractive female with the words, “How you doing?” There was *philia*, a love between friends, from which we get the name for the City of Brotherly Love, Philadelphia. There was *storge*, a kind of family love, like the love siblings would have for each other.

But none of those describe the kind of love John is talking about here. He is talking about *agape*, a selfless, other-focused love that knows no boundaries. *Agape* is a deep soul love, a love that is not dampened by what a person does because it is focused on who a person is. Agape love is the kind of love God has for us.

This understanding of God’s agape love brings with it some major implications for us. First of all, it means there’s nothing we can do to earn or lose this love. That’s a big relief to me, because I have to admit I’ve done some things in my life that I feel make me pretty unloveable. We may never have given any Mother’s Day cards like Calvin’s, but I bet we’ve all thought some thoughts and done some things. If we were to share these things in a room full of people and asked everyone who thought less of us to leave, when we finished only our mothers would still be there.

The reality of grace is that God’s love for us doesn’t depend on our love for God. Author Anne LaMott, in her book “Traveling Mercies,” says: “The mystery of God’s love is that God loves the man who is being mean to his dog just as much as he loves babies.” She says that God loves the murderer as much as he loves Desmond Tutu. “So of course he loves old ordinary me, even or especially at my most scared and petty and mean and obsessive. He loves me. He chooses me.”

Pastor and author Brendan Manning explains God’s love this way: “I love the Jersey shore, Handel’s *Messiah*, hot fudge, and my wife. I love what I find pleasant and appealing. I love someone for what I see in him or her. But God is not like that. It’s not that God detects what is pleasant and appealing in us and responds to us with his favor. He is the source of love. He acts; he doesn’t react. He is love without motive. Does God love me because I spend time with AIDS victims and alcoholics, or because I spend an hour in prayer every day? Or because I’m rigorously faithful to my wife? If I believe that, I am a Pharisee who feels entitled to be comfortably close to Christ because of my good works. The gospel of grace says that I am loved for one reason only and that is because God loves me...period.”

That’s the love of God. That’s what John means when he says God is love. God is the source of all the love in the world. This is love: not that we loved God, but that God loved us. Our love is not self-generated; we cannot choose to make more love. We can only choose how we use the love God has given us, whether to hoard it or share it, whether to put it to good use or throw it away.

If we are made in God’s image, and God is love, then we, too, must love. The Christian rock group Superchic(k) says it this way in their song, “We Live”: “We live, we love, we forgive and never give up. Every day we are given is a gift from above, so today we remember to live and to love.”

Every day is a chance to put God's love to use, to love each other and in doing so reflect the image of God. That's what our mothers have so graciously given us: a life of love. It may not have always felt that way, but we know in our hearts that it's true. We talked about this last week in Bible study, and each parent present said it was amazing how smart they got as their children got older. I think we look at our parents through different eyes once we have children of our own, because we can begin to understand the depth of love our parents have for us.

It's a motherly love. It's a Godly love.

- It's the kind of love molded by long, sleepless nights of crying and rocking and comforting and worrying.
- It's the kind of love that compels you to hug your kid because they feel guilty about doing something wrong when you'd rather smack them upside the head.
- It's the kind of love that makes it OK to go to work with oatmeal in your hair and spit-up on your blouse.
- It's the kind of love that makes you want to take out a contract on the kid who punched your child in the nose.
- It's the kind of love that hires a babysitter so you and your husband can have dinner alone, then spends the whole night talking about and checking on the kids.
- It's the kind of love that hopes ketchup is a vegetable because it's the only one your child eats.
- It's the kind of love that cries when your child clings to you on the first day of school, and cries even harder when he doesn't cling to you on the second day.
- It's the kind of love that says at least once a day, "I can't do this!" but wouldn't trade it for anything in the world.

Our mothers may be the closest example we have of God's love for us. Some of us may roll our eyes at that and think, "If you only knew my mother." But here's the simple truth: despite our moments of being scared or petty or mean or obsessive, they have loved us, with a Godly, motherly kind of love. May we all aspire to love each other the same love, and in doing so re-present God to each other. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. We live, we love.